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Annunciation / Visitation

La Salle University Art Museum

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Annunciation/Visitation

Christmas Exhibition

La Salle University Art Museum

December 8, 1986 - January 31, 1987

Annunciation - Visitation

Although the Annunciation to the Virgin is commemorated on March 25, nine months before the birth of Christ, its visual celebration is traditionally a part of the repertoire of Christmas images. And the doctrinal importance of this event, --the incarnation, (the moment the Holy Spirit enters the Virgin and Christ is conceived)--has given great prominence to its visual interpretation. A rich and varied iconographic tradition developed around this image, especially in Medieval and Renaissance times, which we can only touch upon in this small exhibition.

We have seen in past La Salle Museum Christmas displays how artists were inspired by apocryphal writings as well as their own imaginations to expand the Biblical narrative. Thus, artists of the Annunciation make use of such texts as the 2nd century Protoevangelium of James and the 12th century Golden Legend (a later edition is on display here) to heighten both their own and the spectators understanding of this sacred theme.

The two principal characters of the Annunciation are the archangel Gabriel and the Virgin. The winged and richly robed Gabriel descends, stands or kneels before the Virgin carrying his visual attribute, a scepter tipped with a fleur-de-lys or later the lily, flower of the Virgin. His attitude and stance is always explicit and assured. The Virgin sits, stands or kneels at a 'prie-dieu' and her attitude is the opposite of Gabriel's--passive, submissive, and humble, as she listens to the awesome words of the divine messenger. More specifically the raised gesture of the Virgin's arms and hands are thought to be expressive of certain emotions: folded on her breasts - submissiveness; raised in the air - surprise; or yielding--reverence. The Virgin is usually portrayed in prayer or meditating on the Bible which, according to St. Bernard, alludes when opened to Isaiah's prophecy (7:14) "A young woman is with child, and she will bear a son..." A closed book held in her hand refers to Isaiah (29:11-12), "All prophetic vision has become for you like a sealed book."

In Northern Renaissance art the Annunciation is customarily portrayed in an interior, either a church or more often

the Virgin's bed chamber. A variety of symbolic objects naturally portrayed adorn the interior: (see numbers 3 and 4) the dove, symbolic of the Holy Spirit, descending on rays of light (until the mid 16th century the rays sometimes included the Infant Child carrying a cross) a water jar, wash basin, towel, or glass, referring to the purity of the Virgin; or a basket of wool which alludes to the legend of the Virgin's upbringing in the Temple of Jerusalem where she spun and wove the priestly vestments.

In Italian Renaissance art the Annunciation was apt to take place in a more formal and classically composed outside enclosure such as a loggia, enclosed garden, or less frequently a marbled palace room. In most cases, these architectural elements were realistically incorporated into a landscape where space and depth are rendered through one point perspective. Recent scholarship suggests that Gothic ecclesiastical buildings which sometimes appear in the background refer to the new religion - Christianity, while Romanesque architecture refers to Judaism.

After the Council of Trent (1545) and from the late 16th

century onward, in an effort to return to a more heavenly rather than earthly setting, Gabriel descends on a billowing cloud and is surrounded by winged putti all set against a celestial background. The naturalistic landscape or interior, thought to secularize this sacred image too much, gradually dissolves into a setting more suggestive of the majesty and mystery of the event.

The Visitation which directly follows the Annunciation, in the Gospel of Luke recalls the Virgin's visit to her elderly pregnant cousin, Elizabeth, who until her miraculous conception of John the Baptist, was barren. As with the Annunciation, this event was depicted as far back as the 5th century, but up through Medieval times portrayed only within the cycle of the Life of the Virgin. It was not until the Renaissance that it became an independent image. Compared to the Annunciation, the Visitation presents a more uniform and simple scene and less symbolism is employed. From the 15th century onward, the meeting of the aged Elizabeth and the youthful Virgin usually takes place in a landscape or city square in front of Zachariah's (Elizabeth's husband) house. The preg-

nant condition of both women is made obvious as they greet each other. During Medieval times their confrontation is somewhat formal and reserved but, they may lightly hold hands or Elizabeth may gently touch the Virgin's stomach (see stone relief to left of door of the Renaissance Gallery). By the Renaissance, the greeting became much less restrained, Elizabeth and the Virgin frequently embrace each other and in general their joy is made more apparent. With the Counter-Reformation of the second half of the 16th century the enactment returns to a more devotional and less intimate relationship with Elizabeth often kneeling in front of the Virgin.

This discussion is necessarily simplified and condensed, and it is difficult for many today to imagine the religious fervor which inspired the artist and, in turn, the audience who observed his works. But we hope that a careful consideration of these images, and those reproductions of works you may receive on Christmas cards will heighten your participation in the miracle and mystery of the Christmas story.

Caroline Wistar
Curator

Selected Bibliography

Hall, James. Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art.
New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974.

Reau, Louis. Inconographie De L'Art Chrétien, volume II,
Nouveau Testament. Paris: Presses Universitaires
De France, 1957.

Schiller, Gertrud. Iconography of Christian Art, volume I,
translated by Janet Seligman. Greenwich, Connecticut:
New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1976.

Check - List
Print Exhibition Room

1. Jacques Callot (1592-1635), French

The Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity and Flight into
Egypt from The Life of the Virgin, Paris, 1663

Etching and engraving

76-g-562, 564, 565, 567

2. A.J. de Langhe (1800-after 1863), Belgian

The Annunciation

Oil on porcelain

Lent by The Central Association of the Miraculous
Medal, Phila.

3. Heinrich Aldegrever (1502-1558), German

The Annunciation 1553

Signed in monogram and dated at upper right: 15⁶ 53
Engraving

84-G-1282

Note God the Father blessing and the winged putti on a
cloud at upper left. The vase of lilies symbolize pur-
ity and resurrection. In the background the classical
ruins allude to the downfall of the pagan religion while
the Christian Church rises behind it.

4. Wenzel von Olmütz (2nd half 15th-beginning of 16th century), German
After Martin Schongauer (1445-1450), German

The Annunciation 1485

Engraving

Lent by Mr. & Mrs. Robert Boris

5. Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617), Dutch

"The Visitation" (1593), from The Life of the Virgin
iii/v

(Third state out of a total of five)

Engraving

76-g-497

This harmonious, classically composed piece, after a painting by Parmigianino, with its sharply defined sense of space, depth, anatomy and movement of figures is clearly a Renaissance piece while the painting on the right by Bellegambe remains a Gothic and devotional image.

6. Attributed to Jean Bellegambe (1470-1534), French

The Visitation

Oil on panel

67-P-22

In this painting, part of a polyptych, one sees characteristics of the late Gothic style of painting also seen in The Nativity by Jan Provost. The figures are elongated and idealized, there is as yet little feeling for the anatomical structure underneath the flowing, heavy draperies, or evidence of any sense of figural movement in space, and the exchange between the Virgin and Elizabeth is formal. Moreover, there is evident indifference to the creation of any illusion of distance and, in general, the background is executed in a rather flat, stilted manner with little modulation of tone. On the other hand, very detailed treatment of the flowers and the butterfly in the foreground (symbolic of the Resurrection) is indicative of the concern of northern artists for the realistic rendition of the visible elements of nature.

7. (Sculp.) Cornelius Galle, The Elder (1576-1650), Flemish
After a design by Johanus Stradanus (1523-1605), Flemish
(invent.)

Published by Theodorus Galle (1571-1633), Flemish
(excud.)

The Visitation

Engraving

80-B-330(H)

8. The Washburn College Bible
Oxford Edition (King James text - Modern phrased version)
Designed by Bradbury Thompson (1979: Oxford University Press,
New York)

Reproductive illustration - "The Visitation" 1450's
from Book of Hours of Etienne Chevalier
Jean Fouquet c. 1420-c. 1481 (Musée Condé Chantilly,
France)

80-B-366

9. Anonymous (16th century) French?

The Visitation

Engraving

84-G-1294

Given by Edwin Wolf, II

10. Hendrik Van Balen, The Younger (1623-1661), Flemish

The Annunciation c. 1653

Oil on panel

Lent by The Central Association of the Miraculous
Medal, Phila.

11. Anonymous (German)

The Annunciation c. 1498-1500

Woodcut

Lent by Mr. & Mrs. Robert Boris

12. Anonymous (16th century)

The Visitation
from Evangelia und Epistolen...
Strasbourg, Greuninger, 1513

Woodcut

80-B-322

The plenarium, in Germany, denotes a popular book, which gives the German translation of the Gospels and Epistles for the Sundays and festivals of the entire year, together with a short exposition.

13. Anonymous (German, 16th century)

The Annunciation

Woodcut

76-B-1(f)

14. Hieronymus Wierix (c.1553-1619), Flemish

"The Annunciation" from
Adnotationes et Meditationes In Evangelia... by Hieronymus Natali
(Published and printed in the office of Christopher Plantin,
Antwerp, 1607)

Engraving

77-B-49

15. Caspar Luyken (1672-1718), Dutch

The Annunciation

from Historiae Celebriores Veteris Et Novi...

(Printed and published by Christopher Weigel, Nuremburg,
1708)

80-B-25

16. Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617), Dutch

"The Annunciation" (1594)

from The Life of the Virgin 1594

ii/
iv

Engraving

76-G-588

The addition and prominence of the gesturing angels on swirling clouds, the brilliant heavenly light and general magnificence of the whole are allelements of the Baroque style.

Susan Dunleavy Collection
of Biblical Literature

Hall Case I

17. Iconographical Calendar

(Two works bound in one volume)

Antwerpiae: ex officina
Christophori Plantini 1580

82-B-495

18. Book of Hours c. 1475

Illuminated miniature of the Annunciation

Manuscript on vellum, consisting of the Kalendar in French, Little Hours of the Virgin, Seven Penitential Psalms, and the Litany of the Saints. Written in Northern France, the use is that of Paris but Matins is unusual in that there are nine lessons separated into groups of three psalms.

Illuminated books usually involved the handwork of three separate persons: the scribe who copied the text, the artist who ornamented the initial letters, and the artist who executed the illuminated miniatures.

78-B-107

19. Kirchen Calender
by C. Goldtwurm

Frankfort, Egenolp, 1559

Illus. with woodcuts, possibly by

Hans Sebald Beham who worked as house-artist for Egenolp.

81-B-417

20. The Golden Legend by Jacobus de Voragine.
Translated by William Caxton. In three volumes.
Woodcut illustration by Edward Burne-Jones.
Printed by William Morris, Kelmscott Press,
Hammersmith, Middlesex, England, 1892.

84-B-612 (1)

Hall Case II

21. Ufizio Della Beatissima Vergine
Press of Giovanni Maria Salvioni, The Vatican,
Rome, 1737
Engraving by Martin de Vos (1532-1603), Flemish

22. Figures De La Bible
Illustrated with engravings by Matthaeus Merian
(1593-1650)
Amsterdam: Nicolaus Vischer (n.d.)
First edition. Tri-lingual text (Latin,
German, Dutch), with additional captions in English.

83-B-529

23. Missae Episcopaies
H. Machabeus (editor)
Venice: heirs of Luc'Antonio Giunta, 1563
Anonymous woodcut illustrations

84-B-583

Hall Case 111
Facsimiles of illuminated Books of Hours

24. The Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry
Prince of France c. 1413-1416
Illuminations by the Limbourg brothers
(Original now in the Musée Condé, Chantilly)
25. The Belles Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry
Prince of France c. 1410-1413
Illuminations attributed to the Limbourg brothers
(Original now in the Cloisters/Metropolitan Museum, New York)
26. Grandes Heures de Rohan After 1415-1416
Illuminations by Rohan Master
(Original now in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris)

Hall Case 1V

27. Book of Hours For Engelbert of Nassau c. 1477-1490
Illuminations by the Master of Mary of Burgundy
(Original now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford)
28. The Hours of Catherine of Cleves 1st half of 15th century
Illuminated by the Master of Catherine of Cleves
(Original now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York)

29. The Visconti Hours After 1395-1412
Illuminations by Giovannino dei Grassi & workshop and
Belbello da Pavia
(Original now in the Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, Italy)

30. The Gospels in Arabic and Latin
In Typographia Medicea: Rome, 1591
Interlinear latin trnslation ascribed to
Antonius Sionita
Woodcut illustrations attributed to Antonio
Tempesta (1555-1630), Italian

79-B-237(1)

Cover: From 'Die Neue Ehe...
Printed by Anton Sorg at Augsburg, 1491
(The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore)